

# THE JAPANESE SWORD

### **Paul Martin**

Having trouble viewing this email?

View it in your browser

Volume 2, Issue 2

**Newsletter Date :- February 2022** 

#### We are Social



Follow us on FaceBook



Check out our <u>Instagram</u>



Loads to view on YouTube



Japanese <u>Wikipedia</u>



Yes!!! We are listed on Imdb



Share our Newsletter

- For Your Information
- To no longer receive our newsletters, please unsubscribe here
- Competition entrants Competition Entries
- Contact us through Our Contact Page.
- To visit our website where there is a great deal of information, The Japanese Sword

## Welcome to the February 2022 Japanese Sword newsletter

Late January, early February is Tatara season in Japan (as far as the NBTHK are concerned anyway). The Nittoho (Japanese abbreviation for NBTHK) tatara always operates around this time when the humidity is at its lowest.

As an expat Brit living in Japan, the extremes between winter and summer can be challenging in some ways. Winters in Tokyo are not too different to London, but they are very dry (or maybe it is just age also catching up with me), as I suffer from split finger tips, and cracked heels. Summers on the other hand, can be unbearably humid, and I end up constantly feeling like a wrung out wet rag at its peak. Therefore, during the peaks of these two extremes I will do my utmost to stay in the confines of my air conditioned apartment.

I have been fortunate enough to see the NBTHK Tatara in operation on several occasions, and I even got to take part in 2009. Until 2017, the NBTHK Tatara was the only operating tatara in Japan. It is the same one that was founded in 1933 to produce tamahagane for the swordsmiths of Yasukuni shrine, and became known as the Yasukuni Tatara. However, it was shut down at the end of the war in 1945. Then in 1976, the NBTHK assumed responsibility for the tatara under the patronage of the National Treasury and the underground structure (chika-kozo) was restored, making the tatara active again.

It usually runs for about three operations each year. One operation takes about 6 days (plus one day rest between operations) from tatara preparation and construction, through to the tearing down the walls of the furnace and pulling out the completed kera (large sized bloom). Operations are conducted by the Murage who is a kind of foreman, but also the person responsible for the successful production of the tamahagane.

The bellows that pump the air into the furnace are traditional wooden bellows pumped by an automated system. The speed can be regulated according to the Murage's needs, as the tatara steel making process is a rather organic one that requires constant attention as it changes its needs at will. The rhythmic groan of the bellows in harmony with the sound of the rising and falling flames make the tatara appear to be alive and taking deep breaths.

Page 2 February 2022

You wonder if the spirit of the Yamata no Orochi is alive and well within the confines of the large barn encircled by a sacred Shinto rope that separates the outside world from the intangible one.



Tanabe Choemon (Choemon is the name given to the head of the Tanabe family) is the 25<sup>th</sup> generation head of the Tanabe family. His family own the Suguya Tatara in Unnan City. The Suguya Tatara is the only remaining intact Tatara that was active for 170 years during the Edo period. The family stopped the iron and steel producing business in the Meiji period when western blast furnace technology had taken over.

In 2017, the 25<sup>th</sup> Gen. Choemon decided to restore his family's heritage of tatara based iron and steel production by constructing a new tatara close to his home in Yoshida Village, Unnan City, in Shimane prefecture.

Whereas, access to the NBTHK Tatara is by permission and appointment only, Suguya Tatara

is open pretty much all year around. Members of the public can also apply to attend the new tatara steel production sessions at the tatara in Yoshida village (Subject to availability). See the following article for more information.

# **Looking to a Post-Corona Future: a Japanese Sword and Culture and Martial Arts**

As some of you may have seen on Facebook, I currently work with the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, the San'in Tourism Organization (Shimane and Tottori prefectures), and several other prefectures. On this occasion, I have been asked to produce a tour that introduces Japanese culture via swords and possibly martial arts. Details and prices to follow later in the year.

I realized that there are many people who have dojo, or practice Japanese martial arts in their own country, but do not have any line of introduction to Japanese sensei in order for them to actually practice in Japan. Through tailored tourism, it is my hope that we can bridge that gap and form successful relationships between people who love Japanese martial arts and culture, and the relative parties in Japan.

In the last few years, rather than just focusing on the swords themselves I have been approaching 'the Japanese sword' more as a concept. I have been very fortunate that I have been able to work in fields where I am exposed to various aspects of Japanese culture, history and geography. More often than not, it interjects with Japanese swords. The Japanese sword permeates Japanese culture in many ways, and through my various trips I have been able to connect these various aspects to illustrate 'a story of Japan'.

Just this month, I went on another sojourn to Shimane prefecture to hone some of these ideas, perform some further research, and make suggestions to the locals to add more depth to such a trip. The possibilities for the tour are endless, there will be lots of options, hopefully to suit most people. In this month's newsletter I will introduce just a small sample of what is available, and maybe more in future newsletters, as we have the whole of Japan to cover.

Page 3 February 2022

Most people only think of samurai in their warrior perspective, but they too enjoyed relaxation and entertainment too, as well as spiritual and artistic pursuits. The basis of the course is that mornings would involve some kind of martial arts practice, that may include Zen meditation at famous samurai/cultural locations. Afternoons or evenings would include a cultural trip or event of some kind, a visit to a quaint or modern museum, watching sword making or even experience knife or steel making, tea ceremony, calligraphy experiences, or a guide to bathing in ancient hot springs. There would also be opportunities for free time, but there would also be a chance to take part in Japanese evening entertainment in the form of introductions to Izakaya bars, karaoke (it's OK, you won't be forced to sing), sake and craft beer tastings, various forms of Japanese cuisine, and performances of Kagura.





## Understanding Japan and the sword via their mythical origins.

Japan's oldest recorded history is the Kojiki, or Record of Ancient Matters, followed closely by the Nihongi, or Japanese Chronicles. Both of these records include the origin myths of Japan. Prior to their collation and distribution in the form of the Kojiki and Nihongi, the histories were passed down orally. One of the ways in which it was passed down was via performance. Kagura is a performance art that has various substyles across Japan according to locality.

The word *kagura* is made up of two characters that literally mean, *entertaining the gods*. Many of the plays are based on stories from the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon-shoki* of deities warding off evil or fighting demons that were believed to be the cause of illnesses or natural disasters. The origins of kagura are unclear, but it is claimed to have its roots in the story of the Sun Goddess, and patron deity of Japan, Amaterasu Omikami, being upset by her naughty brother, Susanoo, and shutting herself away in a cave leaving Japan in darkness.







One of the other deities, Ama-no-Uzume, performed a saucy dance on top of an upturned bathtub outside of the cave to the raucous delight of the other deities. Overcome by curiosity, Amaterasu peeked out of the cave to be grabbed by the deities and pleaded with not to go back in. This performance before the deities is the basis for the performance art of kagura, telling the myths of the origins

of Japan as well as later stories of early emperors and brave warriors in their fights with evil demons.

Page 4 February 2022



Having been to several performances of kagura in its various incarnations, I am fully convinced that this was one of the methods in which the mythology of Japan was passed from generation to generation. Even in the advent of written chronicles in the 7<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, books were a luxury of the elites and much of the populace was illiterate. When attending (pre-Covid) performances of kagura, I would see many cases of three generations of one family all enjoying the performances together.

Kagura is also interactive in some instances. The deity Ebisu waves at and interacts with the audiences by throwing out sweets into the crowd that is supposed to be fish bait. Then another member of the entourage who has snuck in among the audience while Ebisu casts his fishing line directly into the crowd. The cast member eventually ties a fish on to Ebisu's line as the audience cheer him on in his fight to land his big catch.







As I mentioned earlier, there are other wonderful performances with emperors, or warriors versus demons. However, the big crowd-pleasing performance is that of Susanoo and his battle with the eightheaded, eight-tailed demon serpent; Yamata no Orochi. Susanoo is often described as a storm god, as in one of his tantrums he upset the lands of Japan disturbing fields, but in essence he is just a naughty boy who eventually does good.

Banished to earth for his bad deeds, he was wandering the plains of Izumo (Shimane), when he comes across and old couple crying. He asks them what is wrong, and they inform him that the evil Yamata no Orochi comes every year and one by one taken their daughters. Inada-hime is their last daughter and they are distraught. He tells them that if they give him Inada's hand in marriage, that he will kill the Orochi for them. To which they readily agree. He then tells them to produce lots of sake. The sake is then laid out in eight casks, and he lays in wait for the Orochi.

Eventually, the Orochi comes along and the eight-heads drink from the eight casks. The Orochi becomes drunk and sleepy. Once it falls asleep, Susanoo pounces.

Page 5 February 2022

A huge battle takes place, with Susanno encompassed in the coils of the dragon. Inada-hime too is at times caught up in the fight as other tails of the Orochi try to claim her. Eventually, Susanoo successfully slays the dragon, but as he cuts into one of the tails, he chips his sword on something hard. He opens up the tail to discover another sword. The sword becomes known as the Murakumo no Tsurugi (Heavenly Gathering of Clouds Sword. The name, Izumo 出雲is also made up of the characters for appearing clouds).



**Epilogue:** Susanno takes the sword and gives it to his sister, Amaterasu, in repentance for his bad behavior. Amaterasu gave the sword to her grandson, Ninigi, who brings the sword with him to earth, and eventually passes it to his great-grandson, Jimmu, who becomes the first official emperor of Japan.



The sword became one of the three items of the imperial raglia along with the sacred mirror, and the sacred jewel (magatama). Its name was later changed to the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi (Grass Cutting Sword) after an episode when it was used by the heroic prince Yamato Takeru. So, next time you see photos of an imperial enthronement, and see the long box in front of or beside the new emperor, it is this sword that is alleged to be in the box.

Page 6 February 2022



Even though the story of Orochi and the Murakumo-no-Tsurugi predates the appearance of the perfected Japanese sword, it is without a doubt the spiritual origins of Japanese swords. The story is considered to be a metaphor for the discovery of steel or sword making.

The kagura performances at Tatsu-no Gozen Shrine at Yunotsu Onsen, Oda, and Sannomiya Shrine in Hamada, Shimane prefecture is in the style of, 'Iwami Kagura', and is said to be a more modern flamboyant stylization of kagura. Their performance of Orochi is stunning with up to eight large sized coiled dragons (usually four, due to stage size constraints). There are various kagura festivals with marathon and coastal performances.

I have seen several performances at Tatsu-no-Gozen Shrine (Before the Great Dragon Shrine). The



meaning of the shrine's name really comes to life when you notice that a huge dragon's face appears to be coming out of the cliff face directly behind the shrine. Currently prices for tickets are 2000 jpy.

A much less flamboyant performance of the same play can be seen on the Oki Islands (Shimane prefecture) in the form of 'Dozen Kagura'.

Instead of large sized dragons, one man in a small mask plays the part of the Orochi. Dozen kagura performances seem much more archaic in their style, and performances are conducted inside the floor size of two-tatami mats, with all the musicians sitting around the outside of the mats.

This was so that Dozen Kagura performances could be performed in anyone's house.

Page 7 February 2022

#### **Onsen Natural Hot Spring Experience**

Also, at Yunotsu Onsen very close to Tatsu-no -Gozen Shrine are two old hot springs. The hot spring at Motoyu dates back as far as 1300 years ago, and as a famous hot spring resort location for over four hundred years. Just across the road is another hot spring bath-house, Yakushiyu, that has been in existence since the Taisho era and retains much of the era's characteristics. There are rest areas on the second floor and a separate café on street level.

https://www.kankou-shimane.com/en/destinations/9305 https://www.kankou-shimane.com/en/destination/685

#### Kagura and Paper

After, seeing and being enraptured by the Kagura performances, nearby is the Kobayashi Kagura Mask Workshop. It is possible to purchase professionally made performance quality masks of your favorite Kagura characters. For example, a mask of Susanoo currently costs 33,000 jpy, mounted on a wooden board with the name of the character written in kanji alongside it. However, you can also take part in a mask painting experience. You can choose a premade basic mask, and after a short tutorial attempt to paint it yourself.

Kagura masks and the coils of the Orochi dragon are made from traditional Japanese paper (washi-gami) that is produced from Mulberry branches. In the past, clothing in Japan was also made from mulberry paper. Another experience that you can take part in is the Sekishu-washi-gami paper making experience in Hamada. What does this have to do with swords? I hear you ask. Paper making was another commodity among the daimyo classes, with certain groups producing desirable high-quality paper. This high-quality paper was also used for the production of origami, authenticating certificates for swords and fittings issued by the Hon'ami and Goto schools. The experience at Sekishu Washi Kaikan allows you to make either a single sheet of paper, or a couple of postcards that you can take home with you as a memory of your trip.

A full-sized unpainted dragon is on display at the *Sekishu Washi Kaikan* workshop. It is also possible to visit the studios of the artisans who make the dragons, and see costume manufacture and performance rehearsals. It is also possible for photo opportunities after performances, but recently subject to the Covid situation, these experiences have been curbed, but we hope to see them in full bloom again in the future.

https://www.sekishu-washikaikan.com/english/



Page 8 February 2022

#### Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine

Not too far from Yunotsu Onsen is Iwami Ginzan. Iwami Ginzan is an old silver mining complex, village and museum.







What does silver mining have to do with swords and samurai? You ask! Silver mines were a huge commodity among the daimyo class. Iwami Ginza was a very prosperous and desired mine, the silver mined there was extremely important to clan finances when it came to funding arms and warfare.

Iwami Ginzan was originally owned by the Amago clan of Izumo, but then it was taken over by the Mori clan on their ousting of the Amago. Then the mine went into the hands of Oda Nobunaga, then Toyotomi Hideyoshi and finally, Tokugawa Ieyasu. Iwami Ginzan also produced little pieces of square silver ingots that you sometimes find hidden in small pockets in the side of scabbards.

#### https://ginzan.city.ohda.lg.jp

#### Iron and Steel Making Culture

Shimane prefecture was rich in Tatara steel production, and Japan experienced a kind of industrial revolution because of it around the start of the Edo period. Once Japan was unified central locations of manufacture developed and shipped along the main roads, and the later Kitamae-bune (trading ships) that sailed around the coasts of Japan.



There are three well known remaining tatara sites in Shimane. I say sites, as in two of the cases the actual furnace has gone, but the old buildings and family houses, remain and have been turned into museums, and have coffee shops, etc. There is the Itohara Memorial Museum and grounds in Oku-Izumo, the Sakurai family house and museum in Oku-Izumo, and the only remaining intact tatara from the Edo period, Sugaya Tatara, in Unnan City. The rivers that run around these places run red with oxidizing iron sand. Also, close to Sugaya Tatara is the remains of the sites from

which they used to cleave the irons and out of the mountainsides and then wash it into the streams and rivers to filter it out from other silt and sands.

Page 9 February 2022

Sugaya Tatara

https://www.kankou-shimane.com/en/destinations/9324

Itohara Memorial Museum

https://www.kankou-shimane.com/en/destinations/9310

Sakurai Family Residence and Museum

https://izumomuseums.org/museums/kabeyashuseikan.html

While in Yoshida village, you can visit the Museum of the History of Iron. It is a quaint museum in a traditional Japanese building with two annex buildings (one is a converted old storage kura). Nearby is the Hi-no-gawa river which is said to run with the blood of the Orochi. The actual site where the alleged battle between Susanoo is Mt Sentsu (Sentsu-san). It is possible to hike up the mountain and see a monument dedicated to the story.





#### Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine

While in Shimane, it would be a missed opportunity to not visit Izumo Taisha.



Page 10 February 2022

The Izumo region is steeped in Japanese mythology and is often referred to as the, Land of the Gods.

It is said that, at one time Japan was controlled from Izumo by the deity Okuninushi; the patron deity at Izumo Taisha who is said to govern the, *Realm of all Things Unseen*.

There is a very popular story about how Okuninushi married the beautiful princess Yagami of Inaba. The story contains an episode with his many older brothers and a Okuninushi's benevolence towards a rabbit. However, the more important point in the stories involving him is that he agreed to give the lands of Izumo to the deity Amaterasu in return for the building of a great shrine (that became Izumo Taisha). What we can derive from this is that the clans of Izumo acquiesced to the power of the Yamato clan and the lands and mythological origin tales of various areas became incorporated into the singular narrative of the Yamato clan.

There are other aspects of the Izumo region that indicate the area did not originally belong to the Yamato clan. When paying one's respects (*omairi*) at Izumo Taisha, instead of the usual two claps, worshippers clap four times. Also, in the San'in region, the woven rice-straw sacred ropes (*shimenawa*) that are hung above the entrance to the shrines are wound and hung in the opposite direction to the rest of Japan, and the usually seated Shishi (lion dogs) that guard the gates of shrines, have a different posture in Shimane in that that have their rears in the air.

Every year in accordance with the 10th month of the lunar calendar, the annual Kami-mukae ceremony





(the welcoming of the gods) takes place close to Izumo Taisha on Inasa-no-hama beach, close to a large rock called Benten-jima (also associated with the Rabbit legend).



Page 11 February 2022

Some eight million deities from all over Japan converge at Izumo to hold meetings and decide the nation's future. This lunar month in Japan is referred to as Kanna-zuki: the month of no gods. However, in the Izumo area the month is known as Kamiari-zuki: the month of the gods. The reception area for the gods' arrival is prepared on the beach, and the ceremony takes place just after sunset with fires lit to guide the way for the gods coming in from the sea.

Shinto music is played on flutes accompanied by drums with palpable tension gradually mounting as it gets closer to the moment of the gods arrival. Once they arrive, they are escorted from the beach back to Izumo Taisha enshrouded in portable shrines by Shinto priests. There are special stalls at the shrine for them all to stay.

#### **Shimane Museum of Ancient Izumo**

About 150 meters from the entrance of Izumo Taisha is the, Shimane Museum of Ancient Izumo. It tells both the mythological origin stories of the area along with the actual archeological history from to the modern era. It has fabulous displays of hundreds of bronze swords and bells that were ceremonially buried.

There museum also has many English explanation panels and information sheets, as well as series of short movies with a loanable subtitle device that provides several languages.









Page 12 February 2022

The highlight for me was the display of an Important Cultural Property kiri-ha zukuri chokuto with ring pommel mountings from the  $6^{th}$  –  $7^{th}$  C. in excellent condition. The production methods of the koshirae were very clear, with small uchidashi circular decorations with decorative tagane chisel marks, and a stylized double dragon design pommel. The blade was well forged in a flowing o-itame hada, but the display was not set so that the hamon was viewable.

#### https://www.izm.ed.jp/english/



Page 13 February 2022

If it is your first time visiting Japan, Kyoto may be unavoidable as it is a world treasure. Tokyo has many many good points, and of course as the military capital of Japan for almost four hundred years, it is littered with samurai history. However, at the same time it is a metropolis similar to many other major cities around the world. If you do want to get off the beaten track, you cannot go wrong visiting some of these other prefectures, towns and villages. There is a whole treasure trove of wonder just waiting to be discovered.

#### While you are here... (Update)

We have successfully raised the money for the first sword of the Heisei group of the Shin-Gobankaji Project. Now onto the next sword(s).

We still need your help. The Shin-Gobankaji Project is one of the most audacious projects in recent sword making history. The craft has gone through ebbs and flows in its long history, and currently we are in rather fragile downtrend. Japanese sword making is not only made up of swordsmiths. It is a team of different crafts that depend on one and other. If one of the crafts disappears, or a set of skills, the whole chain becomes perilous. This is not a void that can be filled by amateur craftsmen from abroad or domestically. There are traditions and canon to be followed and passed down from teacher to student. Reverse engineering and rebooting crafts from books are not going to fix the situation unless you have a solid background already in those traditional crafts.

The loss of any of these skills is also going to affect the stability of old swords too. For example, there is currently quite a severe lack of habaki and scabbard makers. These items are also very important for the preservation of swords of antiquity. The problem simply does not lay in changing the law to allow sword makers to produce more swords. The situation is much more complex than that. Even if it was changed, making three or four swords per month while maintaining the artistic integrity and quality control of blades would be quite challenging for most smiths. In my opinion the biggest problem is that nobody seems to be aware of the plight of the craft. I am sure that no one would want to see it in trouble, and by raising awareness the situation may begin to take steps to resolve the current problems.

We need your help. We have created English language pages to allow crowd funding for the Shin-Gobankaji Project internationally. Funds raised will establish the important data of representative works from each successive imperial era onwards, that will possibly become the standard for appraisal of works from the Showa period onwards in the future. As well as, information boards on important sword related sites (starting with Emperor Gotoba) in English for visitors to Japan. As many of you are aware, we are merely the custodians of swords for our generation, and pass them onto the next generation in the best condition possible to try and successfully preserve them as far into the future as possible.

The same applies to the support of the traditional crafts. As individuals, we may not be able to afford to purchase a single sword by a Japanese swordsmith, but we can come together as a collective to make a difference. As the current generation, we naturally bear the responsibility to try to support these crafts so that they can be passed successfully on to future generations. If any of the sword making crafts was to disappear under our watch, it would be a great shame. Your donation counts and will make a difference. If you cannot afford to make a donation, then please help by spreading awareness by sharing the flyers, posts, and this newsletter to interested parties.

Thank you very much for your consideration. You can make a donation for return gifts here:

https://shingobankaji.hp.peraichi.com

Page 14 February 2022

#### **Closing comments**

#### Miyano Teiji Sensei Dec 20, 1940 - Jan 24, 2022



It is with the saddest of hearts that we have to say goodbye to Miyano Teiji sensei. He passed away on the 24th of January, 2022. He was 80 years old. Many of you know him as the former Chairman of the NTHK-NPO (Nihon Token Hozon Kai- Non-Profit Org) and the head of the kantei-shinsa panel. He was a winner of the NBTHK and NBTHK Tokyo Branch special Kantei meetings as well as countless times of the standard ones. He was amazingly altruistic with his Kantei knowledge and also performed Kantei at the Chicago Taikai in the USA. He was a regular fixture at kantei meetings and will be greatly missed.

Thank you for wanting to be a part of my journey and subscribing to my newsletter. Hopefully, together we can make a difference help this art and craft that we all love, by taking the joint responsibility as the current generation of sword enthusiasts and supporting the traditional craftsmen in Japan, and their intangible skills and safely pass them onto future generations intact.

#### **Keeping the Newsletter Free**

In order to keep the newsletter free and allow us to continuously improve content and production, we have decided to include adverts for reputable services and dealers who are actively looking for international customers. So as not to interfere with the flow and content, we will be placing all ads at the back of the newsletter.

Until next month...

Paul Martin

#### **Ads Section**

If you are interested in advertising in the Japanese sword newsletter, please contact us for pricing at: <a href="https://www.thejapanesesword.com/contact.php">https://www.thejapanesesword.com/contact.php</a>

We reserve the right to refuse or accept adverts at our own discretion.



## **Exhibitions Currently on in Japan.**

2022  $1.8_{\scriptscriptstyle \mathrm{P}} \rightarrow 2.13_{\scriptscriptstyle \mathrm{E}}$ 

10:00~17:00 (入意の受付は16:30まで) 木曜休館

一般·大学生 1,100円(800円)

小·中·高校生 550円(400円)

※()内は1月7日までの前売4両金(佐野美術館での取扱いは12月19日まで)

主催 佐野美術館、三島市、三島市教育委員会

後援 静岡県教育委員会 助成 三島信用金庫

值賛 伊豆箱模鉄道株式会社

伊豆箱模鉄道「三島田町駅」より徒歩3分 〒411-0838 静岡県三島市中田町1-43 TEL 055-975-7278 FAX 055-973-1790 ホームページ https://www.sanobi.or.jp/

卓毎週土曜日は小中学生無料 ※15名以上の団体は各2割引 佐野美術館

佐野美術館創立 55周 年 क्त 割 周年



swords supreme the collection of sano art museum



# 2022.1.21。-3.25。 森アーツセンターギャラリー

六本木ヒルズ森タワー52階 (東京都市区六本木6-10-1) Mori Arts Center Gallery (52F, Roppongi Hills Mori Tower) 主領 日本経済新聞社 ボストン美術館、森アーフセンター













# 登呂博物館冬季企画展

令和4年

1月8日 €



2月27日 🖪



開館時間 9:00- 16:30 休館 日 月曜日,祝日の翌日(2月12日(土)は開館) 観 覧 料 一般 300 円 高校・大学生 200 円 小中学生 50 円 〒422-8033 静岡市駿河区登呂五丁目 10 番 5 号

TEL054-285-0476 https://www.shizuoka-toromuseum.jp

直刀 伝埼玉県出土 佐野美術館蔵



静岡市立登呂博物館